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On Reading and Writing

Madame Bovary, c'est moi
Gustave Flaubert

1. Introduction

When we teach Reading and Writing, what is it that we teach? To be sure, we have perfectly acceptable answers provided by specialists, who can enumerate the sub-skills involved in both abilities and can devise appropriate methods to instill them. I propose here, however, to venture in a different (one could say, the opposite) direction. Rather than treat reading and writing as primary school skills, forming the bulk of the three R's, which can be subsequently refined in an academic context, I would like to view them as the most basic terms of human existence. The main aim of my paper is to present in a credible way such a philosophical perspective. Once this (admittedly dizzy) vantage point is established, I will try to formulate a few scattered remarks on the nature of reading and writing in the usual sense as well as on the mundane activities we perform in the classroom.

The perspective I want to adopt may be called with equal rightness "phenomenological" or "hermeneutical" (a double-barreled version is in use: one may practice "hermeneutical phenomenology" or "phenomenological hermeneutics"). These converging approaches have different pedigrees. Phenomenology is rooted in philosophical attempts to get rid of (or overcome, or "sublate" in the Hegelian jargon) dualisms like "matter vs. spirit" or "body vs. mind." Such attempts are motivated by the fact that philosophy (as opposed to science) is loath to adopt arbitrary assumptions (which science calls "hypothetical" and is engaged in an endless project of verifying or falsifying). The dualisms mentioned (like many others) are clearly arbitrary, since there is no conceivable "bridge" between entities which are defined as incommensurable (e.g. "extension" vs.

"consciousness"). Thus, philosophy has been on a quest for a more capacious vision of things, embracing partial (and contradictory) perspectives. Phenomenology is a radical attempt of this kind, temporarily suspending any existing formulations ("bracketing" the world) in order to study "what appears" without any presuppositions.

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is rooted in practical attempts to interpret texts which pose difficulties of various kinds. Traditionally, three types of such ventures are distinguished. Biblical hermeneutics aims to interpret the word of God: what it really means. Legal hermeneutics tries to fathom the significance of abstract codifications in particular situations (in countries relying on legal codes) or to extend the significance of particular rulings in unprecedented circumstances (in common law countries). And finally, philological hermeneutics attempts to remove obscurities from texts belonging to foreign (or even extinct) cultures. All these ventures have at least one thing in common: they look for live or actual meaning of messages which are not transparent, which defy understanding.

The marriage of phenomenology and hermeneutics is justified by the fact that "what appears" after bracketing standard (hypothetical) explanations of the world is not a direct, indubitable source of knowledge. Phenomena are not transparent: they are rather like ambiguous messages which must be further elucidated. This is best seen with "illusions" – figures which are perceived in a surprising or contradictory manner. For instance, the same configuration of lines we learn to draw at school in order to represent a cube on a flat page is perceived as two different cubes which in turn (and quite unpredictably) give way one to another. Such "gestalt flips" reveal the fact that the world does not manifests itself to us in a direct manner: what we perceive is necessarily mediated, based on an interpretation of data.

Such acts of interpretation may be automatic in the case of illusions but they require a great deal of conscious effort in various "aha" phenomena, when a problematic situation – defying comprehension in standard terms – suddenly becomes transparent: a gestalt flip occurs thanks to a novel formulation, or a reconfiguration of available data. To give an example, a group of researchers encountered a problem with a new material for paintbrush – synthetic bristle – which did not paint smoothly. After a long process of eliminating various conjectures, the problem was solved when someone noticed that the paintbrush is a kind of pump (this rather

distant analogy stemmed from an actual observation: painters sometimes "vibrate" brushes). The analogy helped the group to change the focus from the shape of bristle to the gaps between bristles, and consequently to improve the product (Schoen 1979).

These introductory remarks are hopefully sufficient as an indication what phenomenological hermeneutics (or hermeneutical phenomenology) is after. Taking apparently direct experience as its point of departure ("what appears" – the phenomenological barrel), it aims to reveal the underlying layers of mediation, the infrastructure of interpretation which makes experience meaningful in one way or another (the hermeneutical barrel). This venture – as I will try to show in the next section – leads to an apparently paradoxical "recognition that I can read only the autobiography I have always already been writing, or again, I can write only the autobiography I have always already been reading" (Russon 2004: 80). Once this paradox is dispelled in the next section, I will try in the last one to say something on the nature of reading and writing as they are normally understood and taught in the classroom.

2. Experience as My Text

Let me start with the easier notion that the world of experience is a kind of text. This is not a new idea, as we can see from a remark made by brother William of Baskerville to his disciple:

> "My good Adso," my master said, "during our whole journey I have been teaching you to recognize the evidence through which the world speaks to us like a great book. Alanus de Insulis said that
>
> *omnis mundi creatura*
> *quasi liber et scriptura*
> *nobis est in speculum*
>
> and he was thinking of the endless array of symbols with which God, through His creatures, speaks to us of the eternal life. But the universe is even more talkative than Alanus thought, and it speaks not only of the ultimate things (which it does always in an obscure fashion) but also of closer things, and then it speaks quite clearly." (Eco 1984: 23–24)

The idea that the Universe embodies a meaningful design can be found already in Plato. One can also argue that modern science is engaged in "reading the book of Nature" (cf. Kosso 1992). The same goes, we may

add, for detective science deciphering the book of human crime, as epitomized in the popular perception by Sherlock Holmes. Eco invented a character rivaling the great prototype and produced a riveting crime story, but – being a postmodern semanticist – he added a twist, thus "deconstructing" the genre. As William tells his arch-enemy Jorge: "I conceived a false pattern to interpret the moves of the guilty man, and the guilty man fell in with it. And it was the same false pattern that put me on your trail" (Eco 1984: 470). And he subsequently lectures Adso:

> "Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth."
> "But, master," I ventured, sorrowfully, "you speak like this now because you are wounded in the depths of your spirit. There is one truth, however, that you discovered tonight, the one you reached by interpreting the clues you read over the past few days. Jorge has won, but you defeated Jorge because you exposed his plot . . ."
> "There was no plot," William said, "and I discovered it by mistake." (Eco 1984: 491)

Much later, in his final statement, Adso reaches a similarly pessimistic conclusion:

> (. . .) the more I repeat to myself the story that has emerged (. . .), the less I manage to understand whether in it there is a design that goes beyond the natural sequence of the events and times that connect them. And it is a hard thing for this old monk, on the threshold of death, not to know whether the letter he has written contains some hidden meaning, or more than one, or many, or none at all. (Eco 1984: 501)

The dissolution of the belief that the book of nature (the text of history, of human life, or even of a particular sequence of events) can be deciphered in a unique and unquestionable manner has been repeatedly articulated in philosophy and science (from ancient skeptics to modern relativists) and enacted in art (recently, quite memorably in Mamet's *House of games* or *Homicide*). Does this mean that we are forced to accept Adso's last words: "stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus" (Eco 1984: 502; "the rose of yesterday remains only in name; we hold nothing but names")?

This nominalist position is not far away from modern "conventionalism" or "constructivism": since the universe out there is accessible only

in a fragmented manner via our limited sensory channels, it eludes comprehension; on the basis of available, unquestionable evidence we can produce any number of intelligible texts (ultimately, no better than figments of our imagination, even if pragmatically necessary or adequate). Thus, we have come a long way from the ancient belief that the world is a text that reveals its Author's plan to the modern conviction that the world of experience can be merely more or less intelligently shaped into various competing narratives. From this perspective, as pointed out by Merleau-Ponty, "reflection is a system of thought no less closed than insanity, with this difference that it understands itself and the madman too, whereas the madman does not understand it" (2002: 27).

Is there a way out? How can one be truly "open" to the world? Let us first notice that the modern account of "experience as my text" is dualist: there is some raw, unquestionable (or undeniable, as the case may be) evidence which one can put one's "spin" on. In more radical versions, the chaos of initial experience is subsequently ordered into some intelligible patterns and structures along mostly pragmatic lines. In other words, there is something given in my bodily experience (something present) which is next mentally elaborated as my text. In order to overcome this dualism of objective "presence" and subjective "interpretation," hermeneutical phenomenology uncovers the necessary (or transcendental) conditions of presence (or that something appears). I will recount below John Russon's account, who in turn discusses Hegel's argumentation (Russon 2004: 18–21, 54–5, 70–80).

First of all, in order to interact with the world, I must belong to the same type of reality – I must be *of* the world as a spatial and temporal object. Additionally, in order to experience the world, I cannot just be placed within it as an object but must also be a subject: an intentional body which is open, sensitive to the form of the other. As such, I must be able to contrast my "here" with my "there" – *my* there with which I am consubstantial (we must remember the proviso that dualisms are ruled out as arbitrary). Thus, I must have an identity which straddles myself and my other. The other must be a meaning *of* my body. How can "there," "the other" be a bodily meaning?

"The other" can be a meaning for my body only if I could be "there." It must be a possibility inherent in my existence "here" – in my openness to its form. Thus, I must be able to move to reach it (movement opens the temporal dimension). Additionally, in order to notice the other, I can-

not just be immersed in it – I must be able to oppose it to myself, to *point* it. This requires a pointer, a sign: something that does not present itself as such, but as something to be bypassed in favor of what it points to. We can see now that something can appear, can be present, only if it is presented by a sign. In other words, presence presupposes some minimal "writing" – a bodily act of expressing of what is. Thus, we may say, seeing is always reading what one has already inscribed into reality. Consequently, to return to our starting point, the dualism of objective "presence" and subjective "interpretation" is shown not to be primary. Presence – appearance – is already interpretive, it rests on some minimal tools of expression, or "language."

It is important to realize that in this approach the "body" is not just something material and able to move ("move" in the general sense: plants may be stationary but they move while growing; sedentary animals have moving parts). One's "body" is *what allows one to realize one's desires* (or needs, if we want a wider term to cover lower organisms). Thus in the case of human beings, as is well shown by developmental psychologists, one's material body is not one's own from the start – it must be appropriated in action. The material body is turned into one's body when it exists as the expression of one's will. When learning to control "its own" body, the child develops the division between oneself and others. In this process the primary appropriation of one's body is, with the passage of time, reproduced on a larger level when one develops habits of interaction with things and other people. Through habituation what was alien and resistant becomes "one's own" – the medium for one's own self-expression and self-realization. In short, one's *extended body* (if this formulation seems far-fetched, one should recall how easily we appropriate the potential for extraordinary movement inherent in various vehicles or sport gear, which are integrated into our "body schema"; but the most obvious confirmation of the presence of extended bodies comes from our deep, existential identification with various social collectives, be it a marital union or a body politic).

We may now pass from the notion of minimal "writing" and "reading" – possible for all sentient beings – to something possible only for ourselves. Hegel analyzes this passage in his famous discussion of the master / slave relationship (cf. Russon 2004: 72 ff.). An individual who is not opposed in any way by other selves may function as the center of her world (we may think in this context of the child who acts like a little tyrant:

it is enough to cry to get whatever she craves). This primitive form of self--consciousness – that one may do what one wants – must be transformed if one is to develop. In particular, one must recognize one's dependence on other selves, which means setting up mutually acceptable patterns of behavior. The first logical step in this process is a clash of selves. Since they recognize nothing opposing their will, the natural outcome (according to Hegel) is the struggle to the death to show the other self that one is the real center of the world and that one by risking one's life does not depend on it. The struggle may be stopped if one of the fighters recognizes the other as the real center (master), and thus acknowledges her dependence on her own life, while simultaneously the other fighter recognizes her as slave. This mutual recognition serves as the basis of social institutions within which the subsequent communal life is lived.

However, a mutual recognition is possible only if both parties can communicate it. The loser, who is the initiator of the deal, must be able to change her body from an unconscious medium allowing the satisfaction of her will into a self-conscious medium of expression of the will. In short, she must turn the essence of her body into gesture. The winner, on the other hand, must be able to recognize her *as* gesturing and to understand the gesture involved. In this basic scenario, the slave-to-be "writes" a text – offers a totalized expression which embodies a unified intent and which "calls out" to be read – while the master-to-be recognizes and "reads" this text. Thus, an act of reading, or interpretation, involves "totalization" and "unification": the decision to recognize some determinate extent (material totality) as signifier and the positing of some determinate intent as signified. The criterion of truth in the reading under discussion is a successful communication: a recognition and an adequate interpretation of the intent expressed. One must realize, however, that both writing and reading are open-ended projects: one can never rest assured that one has communicated oneself or understood the other as long as one's projection of consequences is not borne out by the behavior of the other party.

Here, at last, we may begin to appreciate the enormous difference between the standard, relativist interpretation of "experience as my text" and the interpretation I have been trying to offer above. The former dualist position divides experience into a passive "objective" part (something simply appears, it is present) and an active "subjective" part (we read it in our way, we put our spin on it). According to the latter position, something may appear only if it is mediated by our body, which writes and reads si-

multaneously. At the lower level of sentience, the body writes, because it unconsciously turns some totality of experience into a sign for an existentially important content (food, mating partner, predator), and reads, because it enacts this text, it immediately follows this inscription in its behavior. At the higher level of self-consciousness, the body as the system of life support changes its essence to become the body as self-expression. The body writes when it gestures, or produces a material totality to express its intent. The body reads when it recognizes such a totality and is able to discover a unified intent in it.

In the master and slave story discussed above I presented the slave as writing and the master as reading. How can this be reconciled with the paradoxical idea introduced in the first section that we can read only what we have always been writing and we can write only what we have always been reading? The answer hinges on the notion of the body. Hegel's story describes the logic of its transformation from life support into gesture, from animality into humanity (to be sure, gestures are present in the animal kingdom but they have a different status there, which I cannot hope to elucidate at this point). Once this threshold is crossed – and we can assume this is the case with all human beings (with possible exceptions in the case of serious anomalies, e.g. people with debilitating organic defects, or feral children perhaps) – the body is never just the system of life support but always already gesture. Apparently, this is true in some ways already for infants who focus their attention on their mother's gestures (as first manifested by the movements of their eyes; in this they differ from new-born babies of higher primates). Thus, very early on human beings participate in "extended bodies" engaged in simultaneous writing and reading.

It is crucial to realize that the body in question is an intersubjective collective, within which particular subjects perform roles ascribed to them by the logic of a given community (that is, ascribed in the light of its legitimate aims). In the mother/child relationship the roles are clearly different and (at least at first) extremely unequal. For some time the child cannot even be said to "perform" its role – it grows up into it, becoming self-conscious in the process. The mother, of course, is self-conscious from the start and knows the general logic of this extended body (as inscribed by her culture, which offers various paradigms of a "good mother," "normal child," "happy family" and so on). But while reading the particular text of her relationship with her child (the history they have written

together in unequal parts, their autobiography), she may encounter obstacles which may force her to reevaluate, and consequently to rewrite the part she plays ("Am I a good mother?"; "Is this what motherhood is about?"; "What should I do for my child in this extraordinary situation?"). The texts – the autobiographies – written by particular bodies of one kind or another will influence in the long run the general shape and self-perception of a given body type (e.g. "what is modern family?").

To be sure, I have only started to develop this perspective and I am afraid that I have raised more questions than I answered. At this point, I may only hope that the vantage point is firm enough to allow me to make a few observations on the nature of reading and writing in the standard sense and on our pedagogical attempts in these domains.

3. Concluding Remarks

Let me start with the famous statement made by Flaubert about his most notorious protagonist – quoted as the motto to this essay – which may seem now much less paradoxical, or even quite straightforward. To some extent, a writer must identify with *all* her characters and her writing is always in some ways autobiographical. Writing proper is self-expression not in the limited "subjective" sense – that one expresses one's "inner self" – but in the extended sense I tried to sketch above: the writer participates in various larger bodies and may aspire to contribute to their self-comprehension (this is, of course, not necessary: mediocre or merely clever writers run in the automatic mode, following standard expectations). The largest such body is "common humanity" – this explains why good actors performing the part of an entirely obnoxious, corrupt or plainly evil character invariably search for a "human touch" in the life of their protagonist, so that they themselves, and their audience, can identify with the "monster" (and thus be able to get involved in the story in a deeper, existential sense).

Such acts of "identification" with fictional characters come naturally to us. Most boys in Poland identified themselves at some stage with Kmicic, Wołodyjowski, Tomek Wilmowski or Hans Kloss. I am less knowledgeable about girls, but Anne Shirley (of Green Gables etc.), Pippi Langstrumpf (that one for tomboys) or Scarlett O'Hara (for somewhat older ones) come to mind. We tend to assume that only children identify with fictional heroes (their "role models") in a potentially life-

transforming manner because they are in the process of developing a stable identity. Grown-up readers are not supposed to impersonate their favorite protagonists but merely to "bracket" their humdrum existence in fleeting acts of identification with their heroes (hence the label "escapist literature"). Madame Bovary – and most famously Don Quixote – serve as literary warnings against shaping one's life according to fictional models.

But the popular perception of the role of fiction – basically, as entertainment – is wide of the mark. Fiction (whether in literature, or more and more often in film and "virtual reality") is not about a temporary distraction, or only on the face of it. We crave fiction because we have the ingrained need to identify with things and people, to form extended bodies, while fiction provides perhaps the best medium in this respect. To be sure, if the account in the previous section holds water, all intercourse with reality is nothing else but a participation in one's extended bodies. But in the daily treadmill everything worthwhile comes at a price: of effort, risk, frustration, or even humiliation and defeat. The only price for participation in fictional extended bodies (apart from the ticket) seems to be a "willing suspension of disbelief."

Coleridge's formula (whatever its original application) is not, however, apt as a description of (the conditions of) fictional experience. It is based on an opposition between what is credible (whether in life, or in "accepted" forms of art) and what is, at least initially, outlandish, opposed to standard expectations, or even bereft of sense. But the latter state of affairs is exactly what holds our interest, makes the fictional experience potentially illuminating (rather than merely "cathartic" – any trashy romcom will do for an emotional release). Thus, if one suspends anything, it is not "disbelief" but rather standard "reading habits." Even if many readers (viewers) like to read (watch) only what they already like, fiction – by definition – offers a sphere unconstrained by the limitations of daily routine and, as a consequence, continuously transforms its languages, styles of expression.

Why should one want to extend and refine one's reading habits (here, to conclude, we come closer to the academic context)? There are probably many adequate answers, depending on one's station in life, but I would like to put forward here just one, linked to the metaphysical context described previously. Reading – in the general sense – aims at understanding texts written by "our extended body." The body in question is Academia, which leaves its members (*de iure*) the most complete free-

dom to read and write, or to "couple with reality" in the theoretical mode (that is, to interpret phenomena by developing various styles of questioning, or expressing, them). This tremendous freedom of inquiry is built on the foundation of responsibility: members are obliged to communicate and criticize their findings – to write and read in the standard sense of the words – as transparently as they can (it is only superficially paradoxical that the greater the freedom, the greater the necessary discipline, but this is another story). Thus, clarity of expression and responsibility in interpretation are primary virtues to be instilled within the walls of the Academia. I wish I had something more specific to say on this matter – the task remains to be taken up in another exploration.

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